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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CONGRESSMAN SHAYS HEARS VIEWS ON THE
IMPACT OF BY-ELECTIONS AND LEBANON'S CRISIS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Congressman Christopher Shays (R-CT) made his third visit to Beirut August 6-7, where he held meetings with PM Siniora, Acting FM Tarek Mitri (septels) and political figures Minister Mohamed Safadi, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and March 14 MP Robert Ghannem. The visit occurred in the wake of the close victory in the Metn region by-election on August 6 by the candidate of Michel Aoun over that of March 14. All of Shays' GOL interlocutors gave an upbeat interpretation of the Metn by-election results and also spoke at length of other difficult political problems plaguing Lebanon. Shays stressed U.S. continuing strong support for Lebanon and expressed his hope that Lebanon would find a solution to the current government impasse which threatens to hold up the presidential election due to begin September 25. End Summary.

AN ENERGY SECTOR
IN NEAR CRISIS

¶2. (C) Minister of Public Works and Transportation and Acting Energy Minister Sunni MP Mohamed Safadi thought that the by-elections gave a clear signal that the democratic process was working in Lebanon. He felt that the close election results in the Metn, where only 418 votes separated winner Camille Khoury, the candidate of the Free Patriotic Movement headed by Michel Aoun, from Amin Gemayel of March 14, reinforced the belief that the Lebanese support democratic principles and are willing to exercise their right to decide. Also, the Metn election dispelled the myth of Michel Aoun's claim of 70 percent support from the Christians in the area; instead Aoun lost the Maronite vote to Gemayel.

¶3. (C) Safadi described the current problems his Ministry faced in the power sector, specifically in producing enough electricity to meet the energy needs for Lebanon. He explained that during the Syrian years of occupation little actual investment went into building new power plants or even maintaining the power grid infrastructure. The result is an antiquated system that depends heavily on expensive imported fuel sources which is costing the government over one billion dollars a year. Safadi indicated the government has a plan on paper that addresses Lebanon's future energy needs, but increased international financial assistance is crucial in meeting these set goals. (Beirut 1189 describes the

challenges in Lebanon's power sector.)

INTIMIDATE SYRIA FIRST
TO EXTRACT COOPERATION

14. (C) In his August 7 meeting with Congressman Shays, Walid Jumblatt, political leader of the Druze sect and member of the March 14 bloc, stated firmly that if the U.S. leaves Iraq, the Iraqi moderates will be overthrown by radical elements. However, he said that Iraqi PM Maliki is too weak to rule Iraq successfully, and Iran is a big problem. The Syrians can and might be willing to assist the U.S. in Iraq, but in return would demand control of Lebanon, which they perceive as belonging to Syria. While it might seem impossible to change the behavior of the Syrian government or Bashar Al-Asad, change might be possible in the face of a significant threat. Currently only the Special Tribunal frightens Syria; there is a fear of indictments of public figures. Should the Tribunal actually do that, there is a hope that a new Syria might emerge. Jumblatt saw no advantage in dialogue with the Syrians, who he said are experts in terrorism. He felt that they have nothing of value to exchange with the U.S. but stressed (as does Fouad Siniora) that if the U.S. chose to dialogue with Al-Asad the U.S. should extract "payment in advance."

15. (C) However, Jumblatt does see an opportunity for U.S. official visitors during visits to Damascus; to demand the release of prisoners of conscience. He said this was a way in which the USG managed to successfully pressure the former Soviet Union and is convinced that this will weaken the regime. Syria should be "scared somewhere" and although Al-Asad himself might not be harmed by further sanctions, there are members of his family who would feel the pressure.

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There are many, in the Arab world and the EU, who continue to invest in Syria. Furthermore, the French and Germans need to be convinced to assist with sanctions.

16. (SBU) August 7 was Jumblatt's birthday; he is "entering his 59th year," which is the age of his father, Kamal, at the time of his death. In a somewhat fateful tone, Walid expressed a hope that he would make it through the next year.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT:
CRUX OF LEBANON'S PROBLEMS

17. (C) Maronite MP and potential presidential candidate Robert Ghannem indicated to Representative Shays that the key issues for USG policy in Lebanon are: to push for a fair resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the formation of a Palestinian state; the complete withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces from Sheba'a Farms; and for the USG to pressure Syria and Iran to "oblige them to keep their hands off Lebanon."

18. (C) Ghannem thought voters in the August 5 Metn by-election sent a message of general dissatisfaction with the Christian political leaders and the divisions they are creating in their political struggle for power. He stressed that the close by-election at least reinforced the democratic process in Lebanon and showed the Siniora government was allowing the democratic process to go forward. This counters the Aoun-Hizballah opposition's constant claims that Siniora's government has monopolized political power.

19. (C) Ghannem stressed that the most important element to promote political stability in Lebanon, was to elect a consensus president, which could unify the disparate sectarian groups: Christian, Sunni, Shia. If a strong consensus president could be found, the ability to forge ahead on the remaining issues -- going forward with the Special Tribunal to investigate the Hariri assassination, the

full implementation of UNSC 1701 and 1559, and establishing mutually respectful Syria-Lebanon relations -- are all possible.
FELTMAN